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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and reviews the Effective Early Learning (EEL) Research Project's approach to quality evaluation and improvement in early childhood settings in the United Kingdom which focuses primarily on enhancing the effectiveness of the early learning experiences of young children. The project began work in May 1993 and is completing its second, developmental, phase of operation. In the first 2 years of operation, the project mapped the diversity of early learning experiences offered to 3- and 4-year-old children within a wide range of early childhood environments. The experience of 4 years development work on the EEL provided the following six principles of action for quality evaluation and improvement process: (1) adopting a dynamic, developmental approach which views the processes of evaluation and improvement as inseparable; (2) utilizing procedures which are shared, democratic and collaborative; (3) implementing a bottom-up process; (4) developing a systematic, rigorous, and agreed-upon evaluative framework which is implemented over an extended period of time; (5) ensuring the action is supported and has outcomes which are monitored; and (6) aiming to develop a process which empowers and develops practitioners, parents and children. Contains 19 references. (AP)

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EFFECTIVE EARLY LEARNING: MAPPING DIVERSITY AND TRACKING DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

This paper will describe and review an approach to quality evaluation and improvement in early childhood settings in the UK which focuses primarily on enhancing the effectiveness of the early learning experiences of young children. The work has been undertaken within the remit of a major national research project called "Effective Early Learning". In its first two years of operation the Project has attempted to map the diversity of early learning experiences offered to 3 and 4 year old children within a wide range of early childhood settings in the UK. It has also been the mechanism for a major improvement strategy within these settings, providing the means by which their development may be encouraged and then tracked.The EEL approach to quality evaluation and improvement will be reviewed and emerging issues from the first two phases of the Project will be highlighted.

Early Childhood Evaluation and Improvement in the UK

British experience of evaluating and improving early childhood programmes is not extensive. There is no coordinated and coherent system of provision for young children and this has led to the development of a diverse and complex plethora of early childhood programmes, many of which are rarely monitored and evaluated at all. Added to this is the paucity of funding available for the development of evaluation strategies and for evaluation studies in the early childhood field. However, with the recent political focus on developing provision for young children, and the emphasis on value for money and accountability which permeates all policy initiatives, there has been an increase in evaluative activity. Some of the evaluative initiatives have a clear focus on measuring or assessing quality as part of a policy for quality inspection or

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assurance. Examples of these include the British Standards BS 5750 or BSEN/ISO 9000 Scheme (BSI 1991), the OFSTED Inspection Framework (1993) and the PLA Accreditation Procedures (PPA 1993). Other evaluative initiatives are more geared towards quality improvement or total quality management, developed as part of a providers commitment towards raising standards in their provision. Examples of the latter include the Thomas Coram Self Evaluation Materials (Mooney et al 1994), the Strathclyde "Evaluating Ourselves" Project (Wilkinson and Stephen 1992) and the Effective Early Learning Project (Pascal, Bertram and Ramsden 1994a, 1994b, Pascal et al. 1995). Of all of these schemes the Effective Early Learning Project (EEL Project) provides the most comprehensive, extensive and well trialled evaluation study in early childhood ever undertaken within the UK (Williams 1995). In this paper I shall discuss what we have learned through the Project about effective evaluation and what are seen as the key issues faced by those concerned with developing future strategies for quality evaluation and improvement in early childhood services.

The Effective Early Learning Research Project

The Effective Early Learning (EEL) Research Project began work in May 1993 and is just completing its second, developmental, phase of operation. The next Phase will involve an extensive dissemination programme for the EEL Evaluation and Improvement process, and a comparative analysis of quality in different types of early childhood setting. The Project grew out of the urgent need for procedures to facilitate quality evaluation and improvement in the diverse range of settings in which under fives are being educated in the UK. It also responded to the lack of a substantial empirical data base on the quality and effectiveness of early learning offered in these settings. It focuses particularly on provision for 3 and 4 year olds as these children currently are in a wider range of provision than any other age group, but has applicability throughout the early childhood years (and even beyond). The Project is operating throughout the UK and is being carried out by a team of practitioner researchers, directed by Professor Christine Pascal and based at Worcester College of Higher Education.

The key aims of the Project are:

1. To develop a cost-effective strategy to evaluate and improve the quality and effectiveness of

early learning available to 3 and 4 year old children in a wide range of education and care settings across Scotland and Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales.

2. To evaluate and compare rigorously and systematically the quality of early learning provided in a diverse range of early childhood education and care settings across the UK.

The Project provides a clear and targeted strategy for change and improvement which builds upon the existing range of provision for young children and attempts to extend the skills and expertise of all those who work with young children. It brings together education and care provision, and includes those in the voluntary, public and private sectors. It centres round the development and application of an innovative and cost effective set of "Evaluation and Improvement" procedures which may be used for training, institutional development, monitoring and review in all early childhood settings. The development of quantitative and qualitative instruments to evaluate and compare the quality of provision in different settings is also a key feature of the Project.

The project, therefore, has two inter linked, and complementary elements; that of research and development. A main thrust of the Project's work is to develop and improve the quality and effectiveness of young children's learning. It is the experience of this development process that is reported in this paper. However, this process of evaluation also provides a wealth of detailed qualitative and quantitative data from early childhood settings across the UK. Data on such things as training, staff ratios, curriculum, facilities, teaching styles, interactions, daily programmes, planning and assessment procedures, equal opportunities, home/school partnership and quality control procedures have been collected which will allow a comparative evaluation to be made of different kinds of provision. This comparative research data is currently being analysed and will be published during 1996.

Emerging Issues in Early Childhood Evaluation and Improvement

The experience of four years development work on the Effective Early Learning Project, have convinced us that any quality evaluation and improvement process for early childhood should adhere to the following six principles of action.

1. Adopting a dynamic, developmental approach which views the processes of evaluation and improvement as inseparable.

2. Utilising procedures which are shared, democratic and collaborative.

3. Implementing a bottom up process which is opted into and not imposed.

4. Creating a rigorous, systematic and agreed evaluative framework which is implemented over an extended period of time.

5. Ensuring the action is supported and has outcomes which are monitored.

6. Aiming to develop a process which empowers and develops practitioners, parents and children.

Each of these six principles throw up a key issue which has to be addressed by those who are looking ahead to future development. All the current approaches to quality in early childhood have had to tackle these six issues, some managing it more successfully than others.

Issue 1: Adopting a developmental approach

Williams (1995) makes the distinction between approaches to quality which are dynamic and those which are static. Dynamic approaches are concerned with a more developmental, incremental approach to quality improvement. They focus their attention on aspects of practice which can and should be subject to on-going development and the processes by which this development might be brought about. Static approaches are more concerned with putting into place mechanisms for achieving a fixed, predetermined and defined standard of quality. They focus their attention on the systems and procedures which will ensure an organisation is able to achieve a defined standard ie. the capability to deliver, rather than exploring the actuality of whether these standards are achieved or not ie. the actual performance.

We have already stated our belief that quality is "a dynamic concept which varies with time and place" (Pascal and Bertram 1994b). It follows, therefore, that we feel it would be inappropriate to lay down fixed, static, predetermined definitions of quality. We have found that if any organisation is to succeed consistently, and over time, it must put into place procedures and processes of quality evaluation and improvement which are a permanent and normal part of its ongoing professional activity. To view quality as some kind of magic threshold over which a setting may cross, collecting a kite mark of quality on the way, and then settle back content would be, in our view, a grave mistake. Rather, quality should be viewed as something to be pursued by all providers and practitioners at every step in their career, in a positive, developmental and absolutely professional manner.

We have found this developmental approach to quality to be very helpful in motivating practitioners and providers who have been involved in the Effective Early Learning Project. Working in widely different early childhood contexts, it would have been extremely difficult to impose on everyone a fixed, tightly defined, set of quality standards towards which they should all work. Some of our settings would have found the demands of this totally overwhelming and would have been threatened and disempowered by the whole process. Others would have found these quality standards to be totally irrelevant as guidance for the future development of the high quality provision they were already achieving, and they would have been demeaned by the process. Added to this was our awareness that to impose a fixed, static set of quality standards might have led to the impression that once these had been achieved, and acknowledged, then there was little more to be done. In fact, some of our most developed settings set themselves even greater challenges in their commitment towards "improving on their previous best".

A further mechanism to facilitate the kind of ongoing, developmental commitment we were trying to put in place was the intertwining of the processes of evaluation and improvement so that they had to be viewed as inseparable. In the Effective Early Learning Project, the procedures for gathering evidence and making judgments about what this evidence revealed, are inextricably linked by both personnel and techniques, to the action required for quality improvement. We believe that separating out these two processes leads to the dangerous allegation that the judgments made are inappropriate, lacking in credibility and limited in their understanding of the context. We can also empathise with teams of practitioners who refuse to

comply with the suggested diagnosis of an evaluative process in which they have played no part. Experience has shown that separating evaluation from improvement is fatally flawed.

Issue 2: Utilising a democratic approach

Given our stated belief that assessing and improving quality is a subjective and value-laden enterprise, it therefore follows that any process for achieving this must embrace this notion at its heart. It must facilitate and encourage the expression of the values, preferences and opinions of all those who play a part in the life of the setting. Involving the so-called "stake holders" (Moss and Pence 1994) in the quality evaluation and improvement process is an idea that we concur with wholeheartedly in terms of meaning, if not in terms of semantics. Adopting a "democratic" approach requires that all those who have a close involvement in the early childhood setting should be invited to play a part in the development process. This means involving managers, practitioners, parents and, importantly, children. In this sense, the whole process should be something which is "done with" the participants, rather than "done to" them.

This approach coheres with the views of Pfeffer and Coote (1991) who critiqued the existing "traditional", "scientific", "managerial" and "consumerist" approaches to quality which are generally utilised in the welfare services. They argue that each of these approaches fail because they do not acknowledge the important distinction between commerce and welfare. Alternatively, they propose a "democratic" approach which recognises the central importance of providing equity in services and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity for expressing their needs and preferences. We support this approach strongly, both philosophically and professionally. It acknowledges and celebrates the subjectivity of defining quality as an empowering and strengthening process.

In the Effective Early Learning Project we have tried to ensure that quality is defined by the shared reflections and agreement of experienced managers, practitioners, parents and children. The definition is validated and scrutinised for accuracy by those closest to the experience that is being evaluated. The Project is therefore firmly founded in democratic principles and we have worked hard at putting in to place a process which depends on partnership, collaboration and teamwork ,(although we might discuss at some length the distribution of power within these

relationships). Our philosophical commitment to this approach was reinforced with the hope that it would also enable the individual settings to become more responsive, more fir for purpose and empower those within them.

Some recent quality initiatives have adopted a similar inclusive, collaborative approach - (The PLA Accreditation Scheme 1993 and the Strathclyde Project 1994). Others have tended to view the process as being more effectively carried out by an external team of "experts" who come into an early childhood setting and implement the quality evaluation process - (the British Standards Scheme 1991 and the OFSTED Inspection Scheme 1993). However, we believe that if ongoing quality improvement is viewed as part of a complex set of continuously evolving relationships between providers, children and their families, then it is crucial that approaches adopt a participative, collaborative mode of operation. For us, this is a key issue to be addressed by those concerned with developing quality. We have found that parents, children and practitioners need to be encouraged to work in a mutually open, honest and supportive partnership which is directed towards ensuring the highest quality of early learning experiences possible.

Issue 3: Implementing a bottom up process

Working with early childhood practitioners over many years has convinced us of their deep commitment to providing children with the best quality of early experiences possible. We have not found the need to coerce practitioners into improvement schemes as long as they feel it will help them practically to do a more effective job. In fact, we have found practitioners from all sectors actively seeking opportunities to become more skilful educators. The biggest complaint we hear is of the lack of available and appropriate professional development opportunities, and the difficulties they face in being able to take up what is available due to inadequate funding, limited time and the lack of access to expertise. We see time and again practitioners who are willing to give up their own time, energy and money to engage in a process of professional development. The pool of enthusiasm and passion for improvement displayed by the staff who work with young children is notable and those who are developing quality schemes can only benefit from this. Experience across industry through Total Quality initiatives confirm our experience on the Effective Early Learning Project, and reinforce our belief that quality

improvement is most effective and powerful when it is a bottom up process into which participants opt because they can see its relevance, rather than a top down, management imposed, directive.

However, this emphasis on quality schemes which are practitioner and provider owned and opted into, rather than centrally prescribed and imposed, does have a proviso. We believe strongly that all early childhood settings should be part of a nationally regulated and carefully monitored system of provision for young children, in which all providers are required to reach a baseline of quality before they are allowed to operate at all. Once the initial operating baseline is achieved, each provider should be encouraged to link into an ongoing scheme of quality evaluation and improvement as part of their commitment to establishing high standards across the sector. Thus we are arguing for top down systems to take responsibility for instituting and monitoring the national movement towards high quality provision for all children, and bottom up systems of quality improvement to provide the vehicle by which this movement is achieved and maintained.

Issue 4: Developing a systematic and rigorous evaluative framework

Any process of quality evaluation and improvement must have at its heart a clearly articulated framework on which to base its reflection and action. We have spoken of the growing consensus, which is well laid out in both DES (1990) and DoH (1991) publications. Looking across the spectrum of quality schemes there is a significant degree of overlap in the evaluative frameworks used. The OFSTED Framework, the PLA Accreditation Scheme, the Strathclyde Project and the Effective Early Learning Project all look at similar "domains" or "dimensions" of policy and practice. These dimensions generally include management procedures, policy, staffing, curriculum, physical environment, interpersonal relationships, ethos and home links. We have found that working from this agreed evaluative framework has been enormously helpful in ensuring a cohesive, coherent and comprehensive response to the quality movement. If each early childhood provider was to work to an individual evaluative framework, further fragmentation and disparity of quality within the system as a whole would follow. Yet, three key points need to be emphasised.

Firstly, to be effective any evaluative framework must be rigorous, systematic and based upon the best knowledge we have about effective teaching and learning in the early years. This will involve the development and utilisation of accessible and practicable techniques for gathering and analysing evidence on which to base the evaluation and the training of practitioners in employing them. At the heart of these techniques should be focussed observations of adults and children within a setting, but they will also include a range of other qualitative and quantitative methods of gathering information. The model of practitioner as researcher should therefore be viewed as central to the quality improvement process.

Secondly, while the framework itself has to be robust and transferable, it also has to be flexible so that each element within it can be interpreted to meet the particular context in which it is being applied. The diverse range of early childhood settings within the UK, and the need for these to be responsive to the families and local community they serve, demands that there is room within any quality framework for it to be applied in a range of different ways. This flexibility should allow individual settings to offer parents real choice whilst reassuring them that the core elements of quality are being addressed.

Thirdly, all those participating in the evaluative process must be aware of this quality framework and agree on its validity and applicability to their particular context. Where dispute arises as to the relevance or appropriateness of any aspect of the framework, the effectiveness of the whole process is threatened. The evaluative framework being used must have credibility and acceptance amongst all members of the organisation which is being evaluated. This requires good communication, time for everyone to familiarise themselves with the framework, and opportunities for an open dialogue about it.

Experience has also taught us that a dip stick approach to quality evaluation and improvement severely limits its effectiveness. In order to obtain a comprehensive, truly representative and valid picture of the quality of provision in any one setting, which can be used as the basis for fundamental improvement which will have a lasting impact, a long term time frame has to be used. The Effective Early Learning Project's evaluation and development process takes between 6 to 9 months to go through just one cycle of focussed development. Other schemes also have an extended time period for their implementation eg the Strathclyde Project took over 12 months and the PLA Scheme has no time limits. We have found it is important that the

process of quality improvement is not viewed as a short, sharp blast of activity which can be done periodically and then put on one side. Rather, we would promote a model of on going, professional activity directed at a constantly rolling cycle of evaluation and improvement. In this way short, medium and long term goals can be planned for, and worked at systematically, and at a pace which individual settings can manage within the normal ebbs and flows of their activity. We have found this to be not only pragmatic and realistic, but also motivating for those involved because they feel in control.

Issue 5: Monitoring and assessing the impact

The issue of monitoring and assessing the impact of any quality improvement strategy is one which must be considered carefully, for it is full of both pitfalls and potential. With limited resources it is important to have some evidence that any action undertaken has achieved what it set out to do. Accountability and value for money are part of the climate in which we are all working, but they only form part of the reason for focussing on this issue. Early childhood educators are primarily concerned with providing children with the early learning experiences that will lay a sound foundation for the child's future. To get this wrong at this stage will have far reaching consequences for individual children and for society at large. The central purpose of any improvement strategy, therefore, should be the enhancement of the quality of the teaching and learning processes offered, and it is therefore important that we have mechanisms which can assess this.

Unfortunately, assessing the quality of the processes that go on within any setting is a very tricky task. It is not easy to identify the constituent elements within a quality experience and to gather "hard" evidence about changes in these. We are only just beginning to understand the subtle qualitative nuances, interpersonal relationships and factors which constitute effective teaching and learning at this stage, but it is clear that these are the critical factors in determining a quality education or not. As a result of this lack of well developed techniques, process measures do not seem to carry the same attraction to those who monitor quality in early childhood. Outcome measures which can provide tangible and often quantifiable evidence are often seen, mistakenly in our view, as preferable. This is despite the fact that the outcomes of educational inputs in these early stages may not be evident until the child reaches maturity.

Yet, we would be wrong to polarise the debate. It is important that we focus our attention on the development of measures to assess the impact of any programme of professional improvement within a setting. Some of these impact measures may focus on educational outcomes and these would include a child's social competence, emotional well being, behavioural characteristics, linguistic skills, mathematical competencies, amongst them. However, given the emphasis placed upon learning processes at this stage (DES 1990), we urgently need to develop impact measures which provide reliable and accessible evidence of the quality of these processes. These measures are beginning to emerge and to be utilised within quality improvement schemes. For example, the Effective Early Learning Project has worked with Professor Ferre Laevers to develop two observational assessment techniques which aim to measure quantitatively the quality of the learning and teaching processes. The Involvement Scale (Laevers 1994) focuses on the quality of the learning process and the Engagement Scale (Bertram 1995) focuses on the quality of the teaching process. These two structured observational techniques are manageable and accessible and have provided invaluable evidence to practitioners, providers and consumers, which may be used diagnostically and evaluatively to monitor developments in quality over time and to make comparisons. More work clearly needs to be done in this important area in developing assessment techniques, but also in convincing decision makers of the validity and reliability of such process measures. It is interesting to note that amongst the quality schemes currently available to early childhood providers, few are really addressing the issue of monitoring the impact of improvements on the quality of teaching and learning at all.

Issue 6: Aiming for empowerment

Despite a developing national profile and the increasing acceptance of the importance of early childhood, those who work with young children continue to suffer from low status, a lack of professional acknowledgement and the perception that their work is less valuable than those who work with older children (DES 1990, Pascal 1993, National Commission Report 1993, RSA Report 1994). The effect of this is felt throughout the system and at all levels and so any long term strategy to improve quality in early childhood has got to tackle this issue vigorously. In a competitive world, resources generally follow status, visibility and power and we in early

childhood do badly on all these counts. It would also be disingenuous for us to pretend that any substantial improvement in the quality of provision for young children could be achieved without tackling the broader social and political context in which such provision is set. At present, despite a number of recent reports which have protested against the inequity in the funding directed at the education and care of young children, a substantial shift of resources in favour of early learning has not been achieved (DES 1990, National Commission Report 1993, RSA Report 1994, Houses of Commons 1994).

We need to continue to campaign nationally and locally for this shift, but underpinning all of this should be a strategy which aims to enhance the professional competence, confidence and assertiveness of early childhood educators. This must feed into all initial and in service training, but can also be greatly facilitated through the development of approaches to quality improvement which celebrate and empower the practitioners themselves. We have found through the Effective Early Learning Project that our strategy of acknowledging the skills and expertise of those who work with young children, giving them the responsibility for taking their practice on and supporting them in this process, has had a tremendously empowering effect on those with whom we have worked. It has helped them become clearer and more articulate about their practice and their requirements for putting into place high quality early learning experiences for the children in their care. It has also given them the confidence and the evidence to start asserting their needs to the decision makers who oversee their work. It is this that gives us most cause for optimism in the future. At last we are beginning to realise the importance of our work in early childhood and to have high expectations of those who should be supporting us in carrying it out.

In conclusion

Putting in place high quality early learning experiences which are available for all children will not be achieved overnight, and nor will it come cheap. Substantial investment in quality provision for young children is urgently needed and long overdue. We have to be absolutely clear, as limited resources are made available to us, how these might most effectively be used, what kind of quality provision we are aiming to put in place and what the first steps are in achieving this. We must also make sure that we do not lose the small gains in quality we have

made in the current rush to expand provision quickly and at the least possible cost. The question of quality in early childhood is a crucial one and one which we cannot afford to get wrong.

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